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ABSTRACT

A committee under the chairmanship of Benjamin Bloom met in June 1964 to discuss research findings about disadvantaged populations and the prospects for educating them. Many of the things talked about then have been realized: More money has been spent. Better than half of the colleges and universities train teachers for disadvantaged children. More guidance programs have been developed and educational technology obtained. Progress has been made in developing cultural and ethnic pluralism in educational materials. There is a renewed concern for vocational education and career development. But education is not an antidote to poverty. Furthermore, the school is immoral when it continues to hold that as its goal. Schools are one of the resources by which society prepares and develops its members. When other societal resources are unequally distributed, quality of schooling becomes even more important. When the society produces subpopulations less well prepared to benefit from the standard offerings of the school, we have the additional responsibility for broadening, expanding, and enriching the offerings of the schools, not as our first line of defense against poverty, but as protection against the effects of an unjust society, which, if they go uncorrected, systematically erode the human resources of that society. (Author/JM)

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Education for the Minority Poor

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New Perspectives on Old Issues in Education for the Minority Poor

by Edmund W. Gordon

Dr. Edmund W. Gordon speaking at a conference with educators at Teachers College recently

It's been ten years since June 1964 when several of us met in Chicago under the chairmanship of Benjamin Bloom to discuss what we knew from research findings about disadvantaged populations and the prospects for educating them.[1] In the several years that have passed we have seen the realization of many things that we talked about that summer. In the 60's we believed that more money, extra effort, and improved technology would solve the problems of educating the minority poor.

We have spent more money. At the peak of activity, over 2 billion dollars per year was allocated to the education of poor children by the federal government alone. We have given more effort. At least half the school districts of the nation have initiated programs of some sort directed at the education of the poor. At the peak of activity, 5,000,000 children were exposed to Head Start and another 3.5 million were reached by the programs funded under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. In addition, better than half of the colleges and universities have developed special programs to train teachers for disadvantaged children. We have also developed more guidance programs. Most of them have simply meant more guidance services rather than different guidance services, yet some have tried to make the guidance process more meaningful for the target populations. Some programs have effectively used peer tutoring with gains reported for the tutors as well as for those tutored. We have gotten more educational technology. Teaching machines, programmed materials, audio visual aids, multisensory materials and computer assisted instruction are available in classrooms across the nation. We have made progress in developing cultural and ethnic pluralism in educational materials, so that teachers can now use materials that are indigenous to the specific minority cultures of their students. We have seen the introduction of Ethnic Studies, and a renewed concern for vocational education and career development.

Computer-Assisted Instruction

Of all of these educational interventions, computer-assisted instruction has had the most consistently positive effects on the education of poor students, even though it has enjoyed independently of a concern for the disadvantaged. The striking success of C.A.I. seems to result from two unique capacities. First, C.A.I. depersonalizes the presentation of material. Some people have argued that minority children have problems learning because the people who deliver instructions are considered alien. Under such circumstances, "Miss Jones" teaches English, but she also embodies "the opposition." Because a computer cannot be identified as white or black, female or male, or middle class, many people believe that it depersonalizes the educational experience and makes it more acceptable to disadvantaged children. The second advantage of C.A.I. is that the computer provides systematic and regular presentation with the opportunity for continuous and immediate review. This combination probably contributes to rote learning.

Systematic, regular and consistent exposure may also explain the effective use of television in education. In addition, the same phenomenon seems to operate in several special reading programs that have been developed. Although the various approaches of the programs seem to have little differential effect, the systematic, orderly, and purposeful presenta-

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nation presupposes that citizens will actively participate in political decision-making. Yet, political and administrative momentum often leads to increased centralization of power, varying degrees of representation rather than participation, and the alienation of citizens from decisions that affect their lives. A small body of research suggests that as people become more involved in making decisions related to the enterprise in which they're involved, their productivity in that situation increases. Participation in decision-making is greatly influenced by organizational size—the smaller the group, the higher the degree of involvement. An example from industrial psychology may prove helpful. The Acton Society Trust Studies revealed that interest in the affairs of the organization, and knowledge of the names of administrators, decreased as the size of the organization increased.[16] Voting on work unit issues also suffered, as did subscription to professional periodicals, output and punctuality.

In addition, decision-making and participation is crucially influenced by how meaningful and efficacious the interaction proves to be. Again a study from industrial psychology illustrates the point. To examine ways of effecting production changes in an industrial firm, Coch and French created three different work groups.[17] In the first group, changes were introduced by management decision; in a second group, changes were made by representatives selected by the group and, in the third group, all members were involved directly in making decisions about changes. Coch and French found that the production of the first group dropped after the changes were introduced and that they became hostile towards management; the partial participation group, however, continued to produce satisfactorily after a momentary drop in production, and the "total participation" group quickly exceeded its pre-change rate of production and remained satisfied with the job. This study was replicated in a Norwegian factory by French, Israel, and As.[17] There, the investigators found that production did not increase when workers participated in decision-making. They attributed this to the fact that the decision in which the groups participated had little relevance to production. These findings suggest the need to distinguish between token and legitimate participation. They imply that participants must feel that their participation is meaningful and related to the immediate tasks.

These two factors, size of organization and legitimacy of participation, both have applications in the education of the disadvantaged. The rise of big-city school systems has widened the gulf between decision-makers and those affected by decisions until many school systems are simply too large to sensitively administer to the needs of their clients. In New York City, for example, the social and political gap between the growing black and Hispanic population and the educational decision-makers has shown the shortcoming of a highly centralized bureaucratic decision-making process. Many of the minority group members feel they have little access to power in educational and other social-political institutions. Since they have found that the public school is ineffective in fulfilling their needs, they have become unwilling, and at times hostile, participants in schooling. Such arguments have contributed to current efforts toward public school decentralization.

The importance of actively involving individuals in decisions which affect them is demonstrated in several areas. For example, research indicates that when parents of school children are involved in the process of education, their children are more likely to achieve. This heightened achievement

may result from a closer correspondence between the school and the home. It may also be caused by changes in the attitudes of teachers who feel more accountable when the parents of their students are visible in the schools and concerned about their children's progress. Increased participation may also enable children to achieve better, because they have an increased sense of control when they see their parents actively exert influence or engage in decision-making in the school. Moreover, the heightened community integrity and ethnic group self-esteem which result from parent and community groups influencing educational changes solidify the child's sense of his own worth. Presumably, one of the things going for middle class kids is their perception that the school is responsive to their families, their community, their social class. This perception inspires a feeling that "I'm important," "my people are important," "the school is an instrument of my concern." Involvement and productivity are greater because the privileged child views the school as something over which he has power. In contrast, the lower class child perceives schooling as something that controls and influences him, his family and his community.

Importance of Social Class Mix

Much also has been made of desegregation and ethnic mix in its relation to increased achievement of disadvantaged children. The data seem to indicate that such achievement is more a matter of social class mix. A number of studies have examined the possible relationship of integration (along racial or status group lines) and achievement. The overall results seem to demonstrate that children from lower status groups reached higher achievement levels when they attended schools where pupils from higher status families were in the majority. However, when children from higher status groups were a minority in the school, the lower status groups tend not to improve the level of their achievement.

Although these observations are generally supported by mass data compiled from large-scale populations, there is a need for caution in drawing similar conclusions for smaller populations and individual cases. Studies of minority group performance under experimental conditions of ethnic mix indicate that the impact of assigned status and perceived conditions of comparison (that is, the subject's awareness of the norms against which their data will be evaluated) result in a varied pattern of performance on the part of the lower status group subjects. For example, Katz has reservations about the effects of ethnic mix.[19] His studies suggest that the results of ethnic mix are not unidirectional. For some it accelerates achievement, yet for others it depresses their performance. Thus, it may be dangerous to generalize that across-the-board economic and social class integration will automatically result in positive improvement for the lower status group.

The Relevance of Schooling

Finally, we must mention another issue of overriding importance. Some critics have asserted that schools make little difference and are not effective in changing the life chances of the pupils that pass through them. For example, Christopher Jencks' *Inequality* concludes that the process of schooling has little effect upon the way in which income is distributed in the society.[20] Jencks argues that if society is really concerned with the equalization of income or economic status, it must go about it directly instead of by manipulating marginal institutions such as schools. The data of the several studies that Jencks and his associates reanalyzed used intelligence and achievement test scores as primary indicators of competence. None of these studies was concerned with happiness or social usefulness as outcome dimensions. Jencks acknowledges some of the limitations of intelligence and achievement testing, but he dismisses the affective domain with a four-page chapter in which he concedes that he knows little about this area and has neglected it in his reanalysis. There are several problems here. Jencks ignores what schooling can do to develop people, and concentrates on what schooling can do to increase and equalize economic status. This is only one of the possible outcomes of schooling. In our changing society, it may rapidly become one of the least important outcomes.

Let us, however, examine the Jencks position from another perspective. Schooling serves different purposes for different segments of the population. If a person comes from

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a population whose social and political position places him outside the line of opportunity, then schooling vs. no schooling is a relatively unimportant issue. With or without the benefits of schooling, opportunity is unavailable. However, if the person comes from a population subset which places him in the line of opportunity, the fact of schooling becomes important but the quality of school is relatively unimportant. If I come from a segment of the population from which civil servants are likely to be selected and schooling is viewed as a credential necessary to appointment, then having that credential is very important. Yet if I come from an excluded sub-group, that credential is still necessary but not sufficient. In other words, schooling in relation to social position is important whereas schooling in the wrong social position becomes relatively unimportant. Since schooling as a credential has more to do with entry than it has to do with progress in the job, quality of schooling appears to be superfluous. The evidence for this can be found in the relationship between schooling and upward mobility for different segments of the population. Some members of the minority population do make it along the same route as the majority, but simply having equal credentials does not ensure it for them.

Another line of evidence is to be found in the work of Ivar Berg who has studied the relationship between entry requirements for work and job requirements.[21] Berg concluded that entry requirements are consistently higher than job requirements. In addition entry requirements are not used to determine who is qualified to do the job, but to select "desired" people from the society. Given that fact, school provides a credentialing function that is essential and necessary, but not sufficient. In the process of work establishment there are other factors such as culture, social background, economics, politics, social class and social caste which may have more weight than schooling.

Thus Jencks is actually correct in concluding that schooling is not the route to the equalization of income. We equalize income, if that is our goal, by redistributing income, by eliminating exploitation of wealth producing labor, and by making it impossible to hoard capital. True schooling has little relation to economic sufficiency despite the fact that compensatory education and education in general have been sold to the public as the vehicle for upward mobility. This objection, however, does not mean that there are not good reasons to make schooling equally available and optimally effective for all people. If the object of schooling is the humanistic development of man, then there is an important relationship between the effectiveness of schooling and general social competence. To the extent that one can better understand and communicate, then to that extent one is a more effective member of the society. In other words, we should upgrade schooling for reasons other than economic sufficiency. For that pursuit we should move out of the school and into the political economic arena to talk about the way in which the distribution of power and resources must be changed.

Conclusion

Education is not an antidote to poverty. Furthermore, the school is immoral when it continues to hold that as its goal. Education is concerned with the total development of people and their preparation for the multiple roles which make up their lives. Schools are one of the resources by which society prepares and develops its members. When other societal resources are unequally distributed, quality of schooling becomes even more important. When the society produces subpopulations less well prepared to benefit from the standard offerings of the school, we have the additional responsibility for broadening, expanding, and enriching the offerings of the schools, not as our first line of defense against poverty, but as protection against the effects of an unjust society, which, if they go uncorrected, systematically erode the human resources of that society. ■

This paper is a revised version of a speech delivered by Dr. Edmund W. Gordon at the Invitational Conference on Educating Children of the Poor: 1975-1985, held in Chicago, April 1974.

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